

It is said that the way really to understand a Bible story is to put your-self into it. Write yourself into the narrative, because ultimately that’s what Bible stories are about- you...and me.

The story just read from Mark’s Gospel tells this moving story about a father and his son. I don’t have any trouble at all putting myself into this one. I know this man. I understand him. I could be him... easily.

One day a desperate father brought his son to Jesus. From what Mark says about the boy, we would conclude that his condition is epilepsy, a condition that in the ancient world was terrifying with its unpredictable and violent symptoms. It was generally believed that the person was demon possessed. Physicians can treat and manage it today, but in that world it must have been heartbreaking.

He was probably a happy, carefree little boy who did all things little boys do: ran instead of walked, played with his friends; got dirty- if there was mud anywhere, found it, played in it; had trouble paying attention very long to anything, and asked questions nonstop.

But then, without warning, his face contorts, his eyes roll back, he almost seems to stop breathing, becomes rigid. He falls down, grinds his teeth, and foams at the mouth. His friends run away. Even adults are frightened. Only his parents kneel down and hold him tightly until the seizure subsides.

That is how I see this father: on his knees, holding his little boy in his arms, and then when the seizure ends, stroking his face, his hair, wiping his mouth, speaking gently and reassuringly to him. And inside, he knows his powerlessness, his helplessness. His heart is broken and afraid.

At wit’s end he gathers up his son and walks miles to the place they heard Jesus was. “Teacher, I brought you my son. He has a spirit that makes him unable to speak, and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid, and I asked your disciples to heal him, but they could not do so.”

And as he’s speaking, it happens. The boy becomes rigid, falls down on the ground in front of Jesus and all of them. The man kneels and holds his son and it is then, I think, that he says, “If you are able to do anything, have pity and help us.” Notice that the man is not at all sure about this. He says to Jesus, “If you are able.” How much of *our* lives, our hopes and dreams are driven by, and even held back, because of that two-letter word “if.”... “if only...if I could...if it is possible...if you would. “If you are able, please help us.” Jesus responds, “Anything is possible for the one who believes.” So the man, desperate to help his son, says what he thinks he has to say to get help for his son: “I believe.” And then, in the same breath, he asks Jesus, “*Help my unbelief.*” What astounding words from the father...an honest, straight forward request and confession if ever there was one: “Help my unbelief.” “I believe; help my unbelief.”

The father doesn’t seem to bring a lot of faith to Jesus. In fact, he’s not sure he believes at all. There are some days when he does; other days he doesn’t. What he brings to Jesus is the deepest, most profound thing in his life: his love and concern for his son. What he brings to Jesus is his own deep need and theological honesty. He chose to act in spite of his own uncertainty...and it is enough. Jesus heals the little boy, certainly for the boy’s sake, but perhaps, also, in loving response to the father’s rare honesty.

And so we come to the heart of the story. Do you see yourself in the story? Jesus’ healing of the boy is powerful, but the father’s honest confession strikes the heart of every person. I suspect all, or at least most of us, understand that father’s confession: “I believe; help my unbelief.” I suspect most of us

live somewhere in the space between belief and unbelief. The father's confession may be the most relevant verse in the Bible for most persons.

This father, with his mixture of belief and unbelief, of faith and doubt, is the main point of the story, and it is our story too. I know the feeling well, and express it with various words: "Lord, I *want* to believe, help me out." "I partially believe, take me the rest of the way."...even, "Lord, take away my doubts." That prayer God always answers...and the answer is "No." And that answer is a godsend. Early on it taught me that doubt would always be an indispensable part of faith's walk. It helped me see doubt and questioning as a healthy rather than unhealthy part of faith.

Have you read those profound words of St. Paul..."At present we are men looking at puzzling reflections in a mirror. The time will come when we shall see reality whole and face to face! At present all I know is a little fraction of the truth, but the time will come when I shall know it as fully as God now knows me." (1 Cor. 13:12) One philosopher simply says: "Faith without doubt is dead."

Why is this understanding so important...because countless persons walk away from church and religion in general because they can't stop questioning and doubting, and conclude that they are failures and no longer belong. How critically helpful it would be for them to learn that doubt walks hand in hand with faith, that few if any persons achieve unadulterated faith. Faith does not walk with certainty. God has not included certainty in the human journey. Jesus didn't ask his followers to agree on anything. He invited people to walk with him and to follow. There was no test, no doctrinal examination required.

With both faith and inescapable doubts, what makes us Christian is a distinct belief that God is beyond our ability to understand or describe, yet comes intimately close to share our life, to be with us in all our days, on the good days and not-so-good days, in experiences of joy and sadness, victory and defeat, birth and death. What makes us Christian is our belief that God came close in Jesus Christ, lived in him, showed us what human life looks like, what our lives could look like...in him experienced human life, even death...and in him defeated the powers of death.

The rest of the story, spoken moments ago, is that most of us live in the space between belief and unbelief, between faith and doubt. Whether we believe or we don't, air freely provided sustains our breaths while we choose our paths and their consequences without some questions answered.

While we do, have you seriously and often paused in awe of what's occurring within and around you, the simple pleasures so easily taken for granted? There is just so much that Creator God is doing for us while we ponder and debate our questions. Do you ever think about what's right with the world, the incalculable beauty and goodness of it all? As you move from space to space, do you register the miracle of your body which enables you to walk, crawl, eat, drink, sleep, speak, hear and feel? (I forgot- touch). And that miraculous heartbeat sustaining you moment to moment! What's that all about? What about the gift of emotions and reasoning? Do you ever register music's gift- to hear, to sing, to play, to whistle, or the beauty of flowers and candlelight? What about laughter and tears...and the inner freedom to think as you wish and chart your own course. What words do justice to human intimacy, the joy of loving and being loved? Does all of this contain purpose and meaning enough to live in the midst of unanswered questions? If not, then consider this: The sun rises and sets without your doing, while at night, the moon and starlit sky present the greatest show on earth. Who would dare ask for encores, especially in those exhilarating, uplifting moments when you realize that you own nothing but have everything.

I don't know why God withholds answers to serious issues that trouble and frighten us so. Maybe part of the answer lies in God's desire to transform us into the kind of people he wants us to be here and

now: generous, compassionate, just, loving, serving...trusting him with our lives, our futures and our deaths.

Even Jesus, whom we believe to be God's own son, shed no light on the unanswered questions. He lived with us, experienced what we experience, and suffered with us...even unto death.

Pascal said: "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." He continues: "In faith, there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don't."

Centuries earlier, Thomas Aquinas wrote: "For those with faith, no explanation is necessary. For those without, no explanation is possible."

It seems to me that God has created us not to stall and get stuck with unanswered questions, but instead, to live the answers we know ...with all that we have.

You know well that we do experience and feel; we do have experiences in which we know at a level beyond knowing the truth. So listen to your own experience; be open, at least, to the suggestion that God is close, that God comes to strengthen, heal, comfort and encourage. You don't have to tell. You don't have to testify. But do listen to your inner life said Frederick Buechner. Pay attention, particularly when you have a lump in your throat and tears in your eyes. Faith has its own knowing.

It was this kind of soul who somehow, somehow managed to scrawl on the external wall- that awful wall of the Warsaw Ghetto in WWII:

"I believe in the sun, even when it does not shine.

I believe in love, even when I do not feel it.

I believe in God, even if I do not see him.

So much to live for. So much to do with my life...

"Lord I believe, help my unbelief"